

K2 and Capitol Peak (“The King”)

Difficulty:	Class 4
Exposure:	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>
Trailhead:	Capitol Creek
Start:	9,450 feet
Summit:	14,130 feet
Total Gain:	5,300 feet
RT Length:	17.00 miles

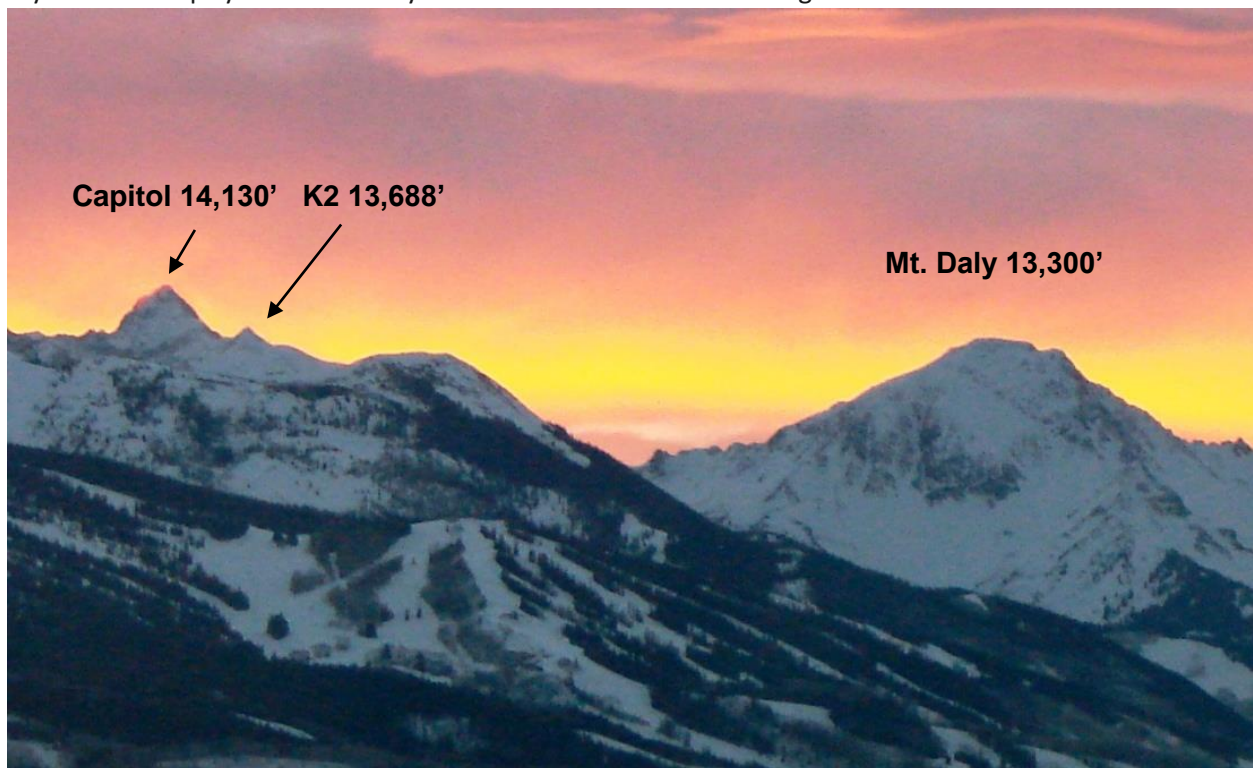
See short video of Capitol’s Knife Edge here:

<https://vimeo.com/71757831?ref=fb-share&1>

Climbers: Rick Crandall, Andy Mishmash July 10, 2016

Capitol Peak, to all who know it would agree, is the most challenging and the scariest of the 58 fourteeners in Colorado. It is a soaring, impressive mass of rock with a famous “knife-edge” approach ridge. Its steep and loose rock faces, and a sharp summit, along with its nearby 13er companion peak, K2, offers stunning views across the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness Area. Capitol Peak not only looks like a big mountain, it climbs like one too.

Capitol and K2 are part of the Elk Mountain range near Aspen. They are among the important peaks that I see from my house windows every day. Here are a few photos in various lighting conditions taken from my deck. Perhaps you can see why I’ve been committed to climbing them.





The seasons of Capital Peak



Named after the United States Capitol

Capitol Peak was named by the 1874 Hayden Survey for its resemblance to the United States Capitol Building in Washington DC. Although the Hayden Survey named Capitol Peak, they made no attempt to climb it. As one member of the survey team, Henry Gannett, put it: the Peak's *"prism-shaped top and precipitous sides forbid access."*

The first recorded ascent of Capitol Peak was by pioneer climber Percy Hagerman from Colorado Springs on August 22, 1909. Percy said: *"There are no difficulties until the crest of the northeast ridge is reached two hours from the top. From this point on, the way is on or near the crest of the ridge and the climbing arduous. There is one rather sensational bit where the ridge is so sharp that one must get astride of it and move along with hands and knees. The drop on the north side here is something like 1500 feet, appallingly steep and smooth. The greater part of the north face of Capitol, some 2500 feet high from the lake at its base, is an exceptionally steep and smooth rock wall. As far as we can learn no other party has ever been on Capitol Peak and it was reputed to be unclimbable by the local ranchmen."*

From Roof of the Rockies by William Bueler.

Here are some other excerpted descriptions:

Capitol Peak demands much of those who climb it. Experience is a plus, but determination and tenacity increase one's chances at success, not to mention very good weather. Any approach is long, the climb itself is equally long over countless rock obstacles above considerable exposure.

Capitol is one of those peaks that says "Alpine Climbing" as soon as you lay eyes on it. This peak is one of the most recognized from the summit of neighboring peaks due in part to the classic profile. All routes on this mountain pose a considerable challenge to even the most experienced climbers, particularly in bad weather. Please note the mountain has been the scene of many rescues and recoveries for Aspen Search and Rescue. Although rewarding and spectacular, Capitol is also one of Colorado's deadliest mountains.

A US Forest Service sign warns would-be climbers of "down-sloping, loose, rotten and unstable" rock that "kills without warning." Unlike other mountains in the Rockies that are composed of granite and limestone, the Elk Range is composed of metamorphic sedimentary mudstone that has hardened into rock over millions of years. Mudstone is weak and fractures readily, giving rise to dangerously loose rock along almost any route. Capitol is a mix of mudstone and granite.

K2 is the smaller peak just before the infamous "knife edge" ridge on the way to Capitol Peak. It is named "K2" for its resemblance in shape to the world's second highest peak in Pakistan. Despite the scary exposure of the knife-edge ridge, the actual casualties that do occur, are more often due to falls near the loose summit of K2 and by lightning strikes. The much-dreaded Knife Edge lies just ahead. This razorback catwalk at 13,600 feet is part of an 1800' long highly-exposed ridge, but it's a circus act without a net. Experienced scramblers will hand-traverse with fingers gripping the edge

I've been on a personal mission to climb all 58 mountains over 14,000' in the Colorado Rockies (14ers). Some will say there are 53, which excludes a few that are indeed above 14,000' but can be approached by a saddle from another 14er that entails less than a 300' drop in altitude. I prefer to count them all.

Going for them all means climbing Capitol Peak which might have been beyond my current skills and strength – but not beyond my will. Fortunately I have a good friend, Andy Mishmash, who is not only a highly-skilled technical ice and rock climber, he is happy to spend time loving the outdoors, even when it's helping a friend of much lesser ability to pursue the harder mountains in a passion to get them all. It was only after Andy got me up Pyramid Peak (see: <http://www.rickcrandall.net/pyramid-peak-a-dream-climb-2/>) that got me going on the quest to get them all.

I've tried twice before to go for Capitol only to be turned back at K2 by an oncoming storm once and then again by early-season snow last year. I've been determined that this summer, 2016, would be the magic. I started prepping physically in April. We needed two consecutive days of clear weather and I needed to ramp up my fitness. Just after July 4th I got the call from Andy: "weather looks good, but it's still early season are you fit enough?" I wasn't quite ready, but I jumped at it. He observed there was still snow in the boulder-field basin leading to K2 which could be a benefit –easier to hike with spikes and ice ax in the snow than boulder-hopping later in the summer.

Hike to Capitol Lake

The standard trailhead access to the climbing route is a 6.5 mile backpack from trailhead, up 2200' to Capitol Lake. Andy and I set about that 4-hour hike on Saturday, July 9th. That hike is pretty and Capitol is in your face most of the way – looking large and getting larger.



Andy Mishmash at the Capitol trailhead – with a huge loaded pack, including a few things of mine. I've seen him carry 70 lbs. – my limit is 35 lbs.



Rick half-way to the Lake where there is the crossing of Capitol Creek – still strong from snowmelt in early July –and it's cold!



As we got closer to the Lake we were surprised with how much snow we started to run into.

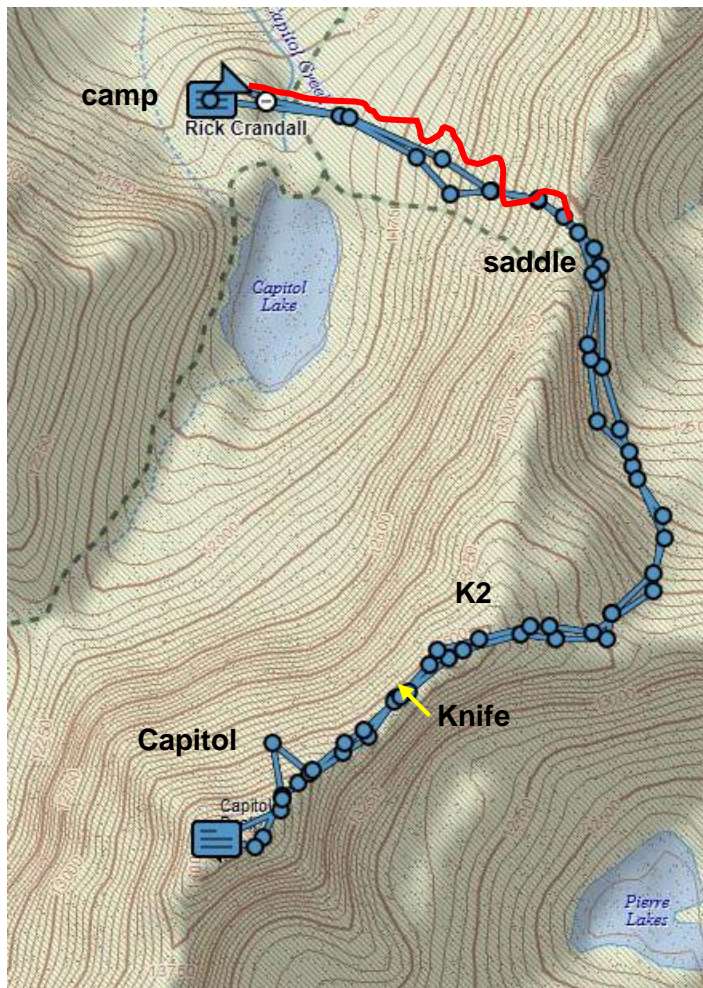


And here is the sight of Capitol Peak from Capitol Lake, up close and personal. We set camp in a few trees nearby at tree-line at about 11,600'



Some of the many items in Andy's pack were prosciutto, cheese, crackers, many other goodies ... and a bladder of Walter Hansel Pinot Noir I always bring. It is my favorite for the outdoors and the type of food we like on a campout.

Andy slept just in a sleeping bag next to that rock. I preferred my tent 😊

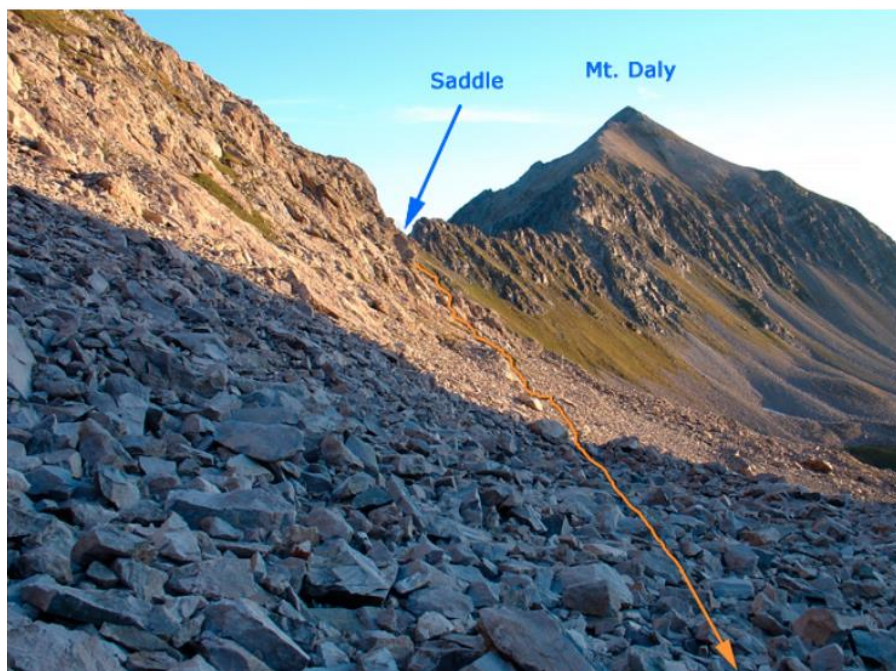


We planned on rising very early in the morning, a 3 am wakeup to be on the first leg of the climb in the dark at 3:30 am. That is a 900' hike up switchbacks (shown in red) to the saddle between Capitol and another iconic peak, Mt. Daly, a 13er.

We were in our sleeping bags just after darkness at about 9:30 pm after a gorgeous evening.



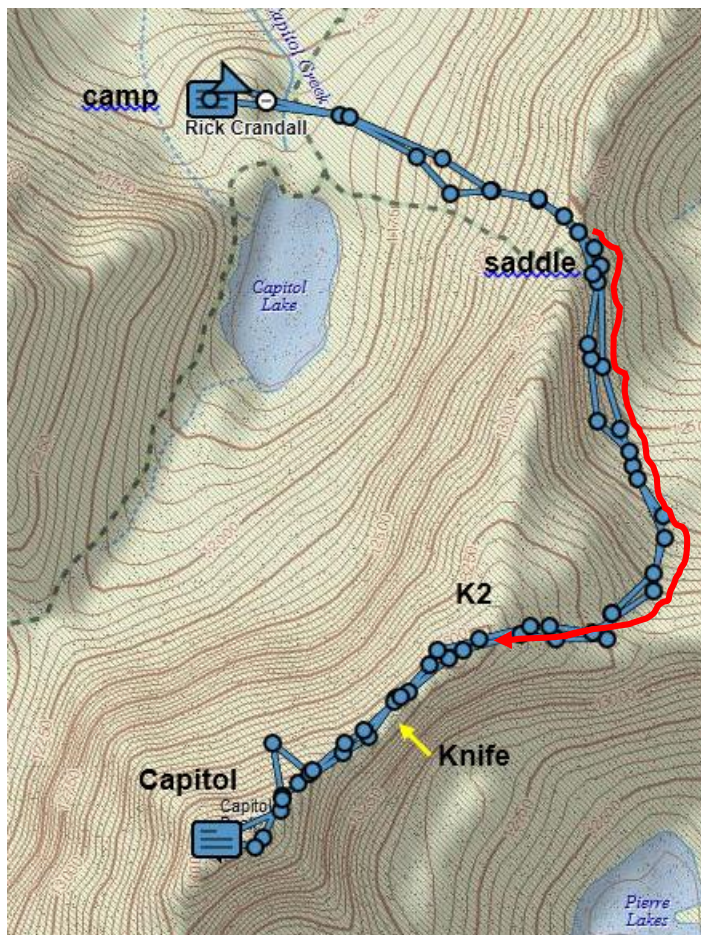
In daylight, this is the hike from the Lake to the Daly/Capitol saddle. We did it in darkness with headlamps.



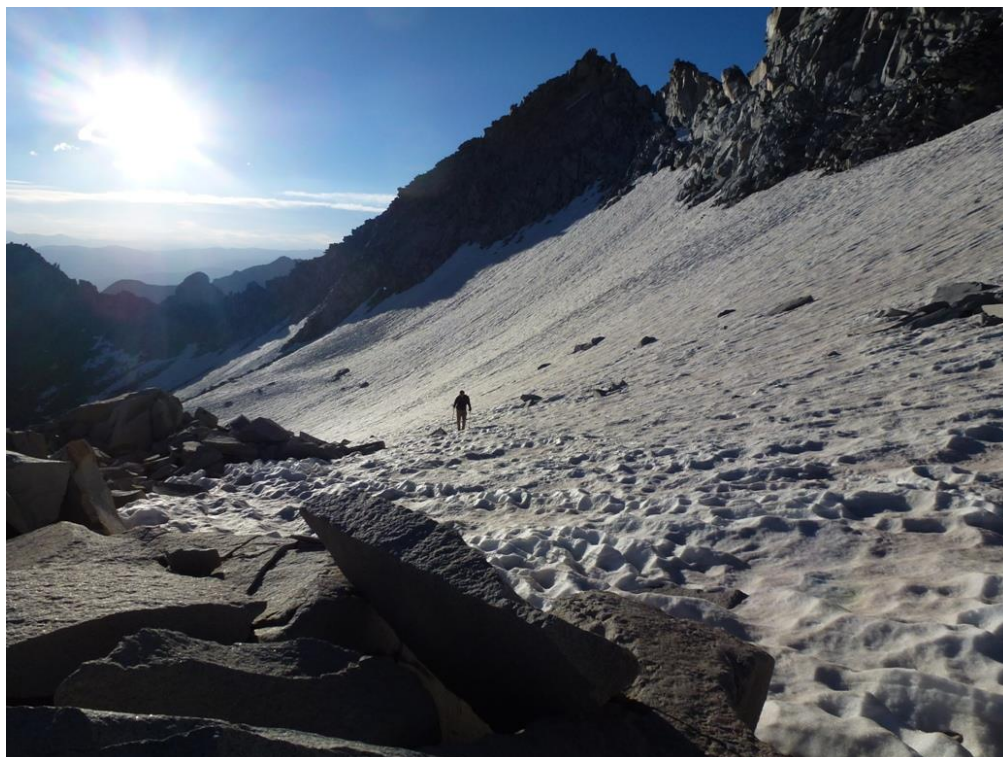
This is what the other side of the saddle looks like if one could see it in daylight and with no snow. It is the beginning of the longest and most arduous boulder-field of any 14er which can be very tiring even before getting to the real climb.



When we actually got to the other side of the saddle at about 4:30am, it was still dark – and mostly snow! Andy had prepared me with that possibility and I brought my ice ax and spikes which I donned immediately.



The next leg of the journey is the long trek through the boulder-field from the saddle to K2, shown in red.



As the sun rose we got the full effect of an ethereal and beautiful setting. We hiked for hours up the boulder-field.

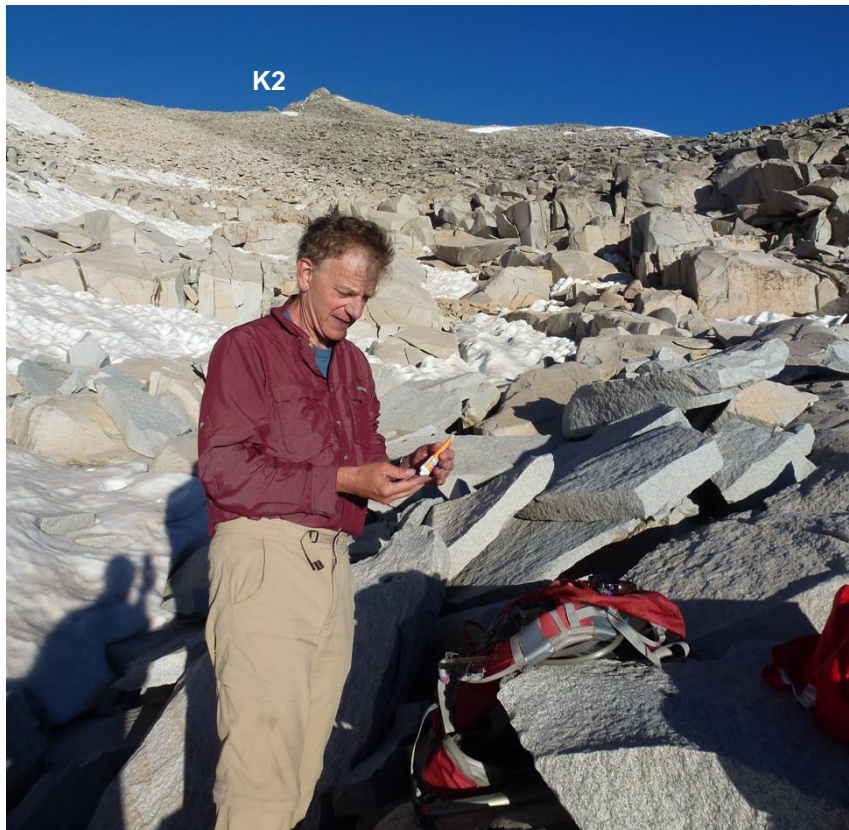
I was making so much better time on snow than the last time I tried this on boulders, Andy was getting somewhat optimistic I could finish this climb.



However after some time, the snow gave way to the rocks.



I stayed on the snow as long as I could. In this photo, up to the low point in the rocks where you turn right, and ...



... that is when K2 comes into view for the first time, and still quite distant. As you can see, now we were into the rocks. The full sun was now out, and it was time for sun-tan lotion.

The weather was perfect so we took our time and stopped to enjoy the amazing terrain and surrounding peaks.

We were still early in the season when the days are still long so we had plenty of time.



These are serious rocks – and they can move and they're sharp ... and there's lots of them.



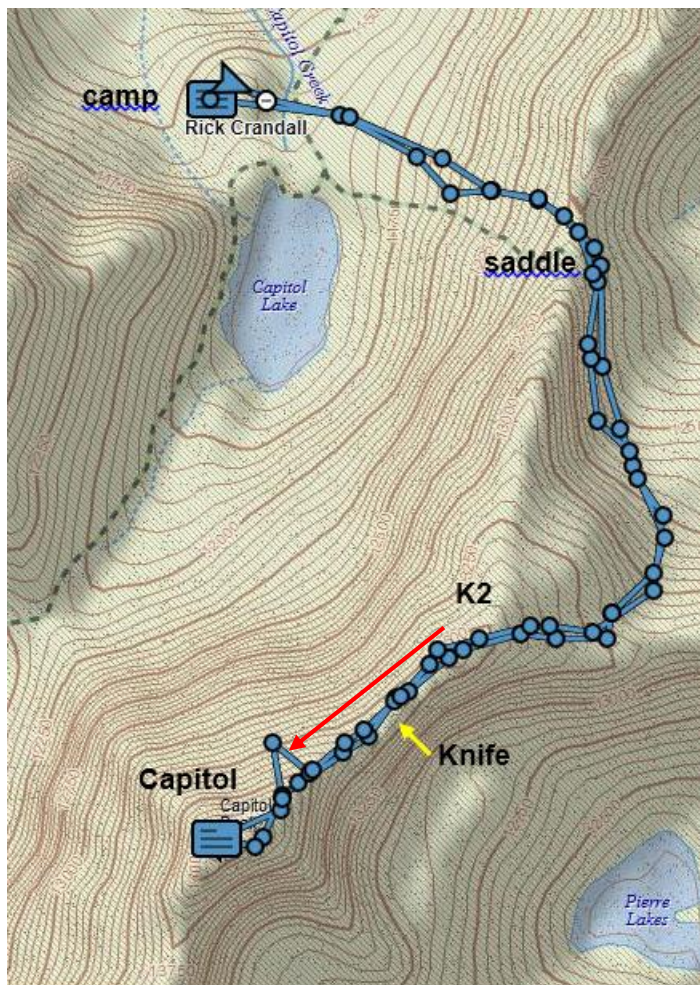
Finally we were at the base of K2. Andy quickly observed that there was snow on the side which made circumventing the summit (the normal “route”) too dangerous, so we went straight up.



Rick scrambling to summit K2. Most of those rocks are loose. If you wanted to you could pull this peak apart with your bare hands and sometimes they do that on their own – the source of many Mountain Rescue calls, one of which had just occurred the day before.



Summit K2 at 13,700' at 7:45am, 4 hours from camp. Capitol Peak appears “just” behind me.



Andy had warned me many times that the sum of all the parts of the Capitol climb would be the longest and most arduous of all the 14ers and I had to get stronger for it. While the Capitol summit looked not so far away from K2, it would be almost 3 more hours of rock climbing to get there.

Next was crossing the famous “knife edge” shown in red.

The one errant dot you see looks like we fell off the ridge but it’s just a mistake made by the satellite system tracking and reporting our progress. Those who watch me in real time know to watch our trend over several dots.



The K2 summit is upper right. The exposure on the K2 summit and the knife edge is what everyone talks about when you mention the Capitol climb. Here's one description:

"It's an exposed section on the ridge that requires concentration and solid nerves. If you are spooked by exposure, this area may twist you in knots. Scramble along the crest and find footholds along the side while holding

onto the ridge. Experienced climbers can carefully walk across much of the Knife Edge. The last portion of the knife becomes quite sharp."

"The K2 summit is a good place to take a serious look at the weather and make a go or no-go decision, as the remaining climb is time-consuming and not a place to be in bad weather."



Climb down from the summit of K2 (blue arrow) to the start of the knife-edge ridge. Proceed along using various techniques (see photos to follow). The total ridge is 1800' long.



Rick at the start of the knife-edge ridge. As you can see – everything on it is sharp rock. The good news is that it's solid rock – not loose.



At first I was OK with walking upright, but I wasn't at the real knife yet. We had winds gusting to 25- 30 mph which discouraged me from doing much more upright walking.



Now it gets really interesting. Look at the steep drop-offs on both sides I was heading towards – and the sharpness of the tops of the ridge. It was also helmet time as the climb to the Capitol summit was next which is steep and loose. The first sight of this turns back many who get this far.



Along the sides of the knife there are narrow ledges and cracks that can take a boot or a toe so you can hang on the top (with gloves) and shuffle along.



Taking your hands off the ridge is not a good idea. Unless you are Andy Mishmash who, astonishingly, “tight-rope-walks” the entire ridge – a sight to behold and I’m sorry I don’t have a photo because he had the camera and I wasn’t going to let go to take a photo anyway!



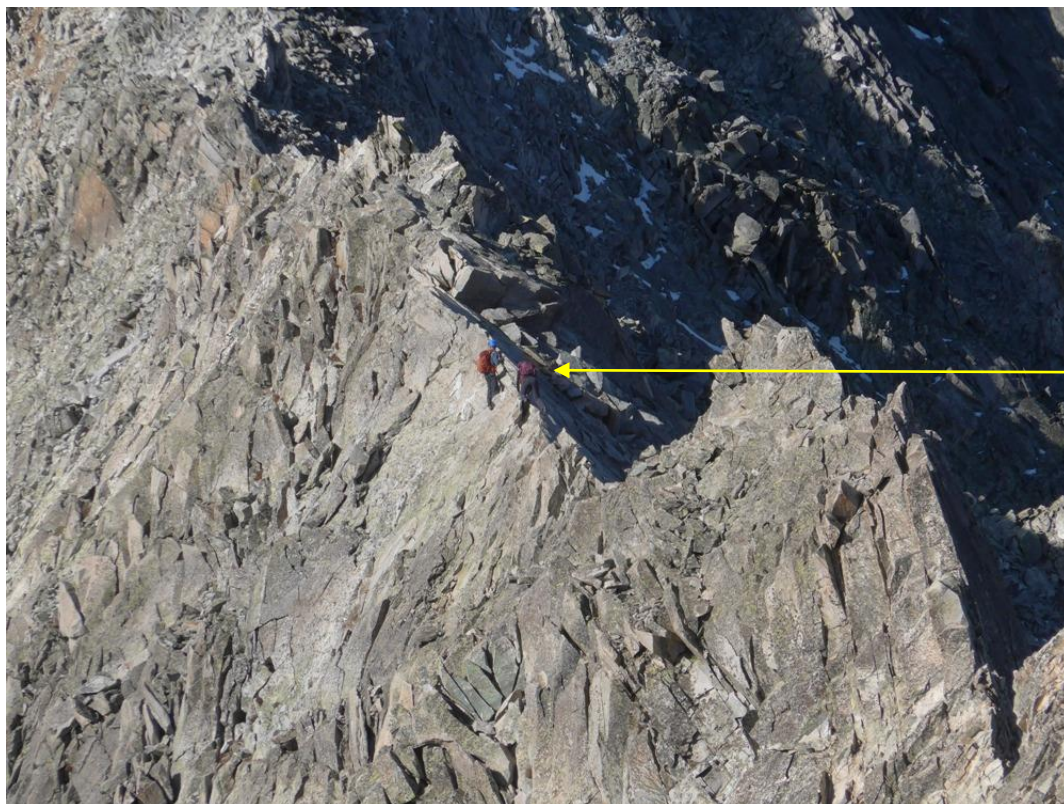
I got to some sections of the ridge where I opted to ride the ridge as if on a horse. In this photo I had just finished one of those sections – I will tell you that ridge is sharp and it inflicted pain – in fear of losing my manhood, I biased where the ridge hit me to one inner thigh or the other and not in the middle – this puts a lot of strain on your arms pushing you up and forward. At times, such as here, there are bits of sharp rock sticking up that you have to slide over – eek!



See short video of Capitol's Knife Edge here:

<https://vimeo.com/71757831?ref=fb-share&1>

Try putting that between your legs!!



Here is a great shot I took from a former attempt when two of my climbing partners then, Rick Peckham and Susan Mishmash traversed the ridge and I stayed behind, believing I couldn't outrun the oncoming storm I was seeing afar.



Here's a close-up of that same photo. Rick P. in blue helmet is using the "hang over the side" move while Susan is straddling.

The drop-off on both sides is 1500'



This is what one side looks like if you look down!



**Finally off the ridge,
the remaining climb up
the summit cone is no
small task – it is a Class
4, exposed climb past a
false summit to the
real summit.**



The next few shots show climbing up steep pitches right across and up the North face of Capitol. Exposure and loose rocks are prevalent.



At this point it was already 10 am, 6 ½ hours into the climb and I was feeling it. Also Andy had to do some route-finding as there were places where late-season snow presence blocked some of the standard approaches.

Andy was taking all the pictures and, anyway, still photos (i.e. without video) would not show the amazing grace and elegance of his climbing. I had a

front-row seat watching the master float up, down and sideways finding the safest route for me to follow. It is truly a sight to behold.



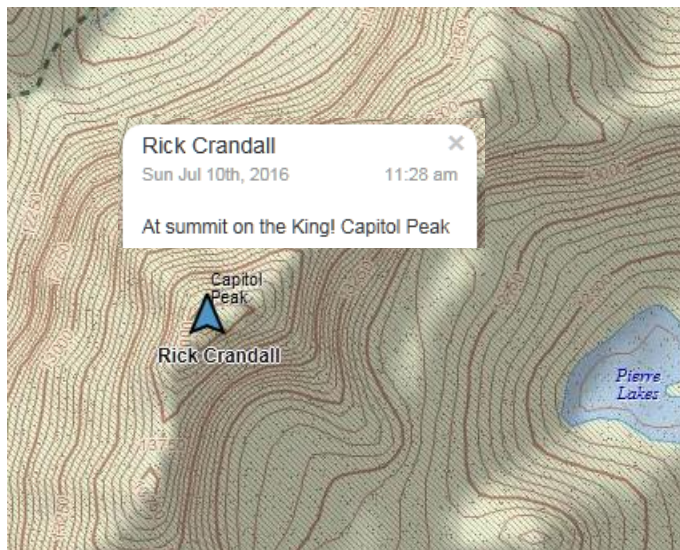
These photos are of me, navigating the way up the summit cone.



And then, incredibly ...



**Summit Capitol Peak 14,130' at 11:30am Sunday, July 10, 2016.
After 8 hours of climbing from campsite.**



**This is my DeLorme InReach satellite
transmission from the Capitol summit.**

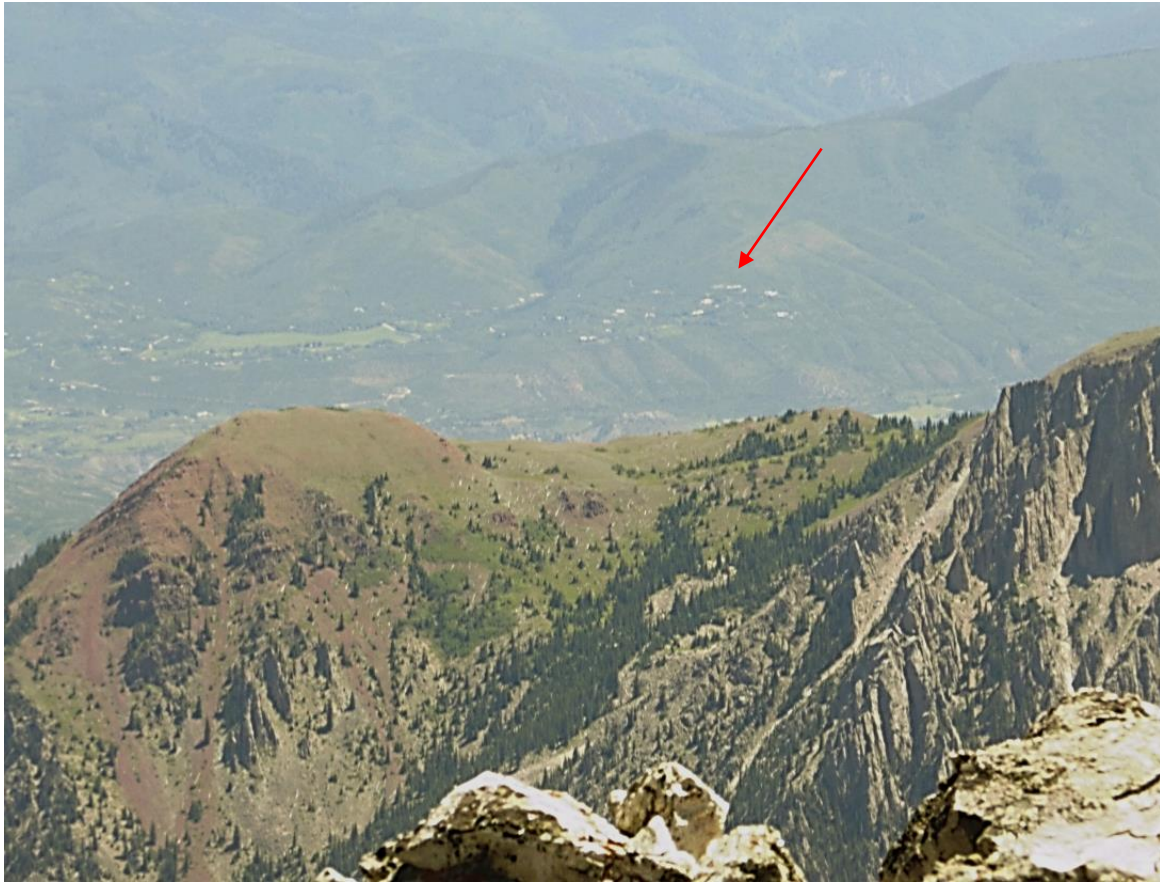


Andy is standing on the very pinnacle of Capitol Peak. His balance even in high wind is remarkable.

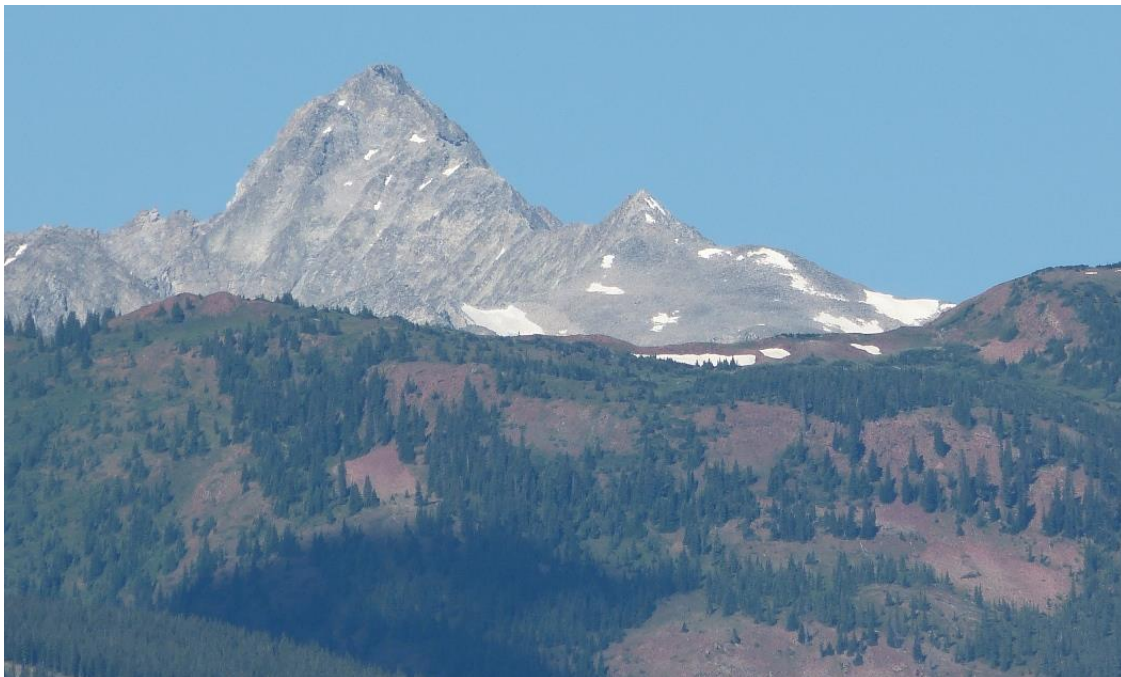
Out of Andy's cavernous pack came two half-bottles of champagne! He started to congratulate me, which I didn't accept. I said that my whole life I've believed that a deal isn't done until it's done and we still had to get me down this beast. So we just opened one bottle and shared it for a partial celebration, saving the other for when we were down and past K2 into "safe" territory.



Andy and Rick sipping bubbles on the summit of Colorado's most difficult 14er. Sweeeeeeeet!!



How cool is this? The red arrow points to my home in Starwood, visible using telephoto from the Capital summit.



And here is the telephoto shot I took of Capitol from my deck the morning I left for the climb!



The views from summit are spectacular. See the Maroon Bells, Pyramid and Castle Peak.



Rotating a bit to the right shows the very hard ridge to Snowmass Mountain, the 14er, not the ski mountain.

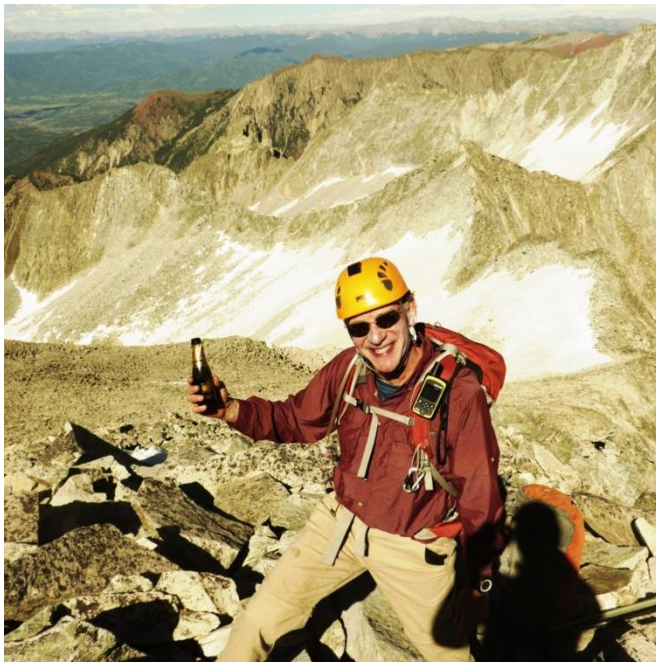
Heading down.

By about 12:15pm it was time to start the long journey down and back to camp. I should have eaten more to replenish carbs and protein, but after being at 13,000 – 14,000' for so many hours, I just didn't have appetite. As we headed down I was fading. Andy tried to talk me into eating, but nothing would go down. We down-climbed very slowly taking great care to avoid a slip.

By the time we got back to the knife edge it was already 1:30pm, 10 hours into the climb. We stopped often and I finally started nibbling on some trail mix of almonds, cranberry raisins and white chocolate dots. That got me across the knife edge and we realized the only way past K2 was to summit it again. I was in zombie mode at this point – I didn't care if we had to go up, down or sideways, I was just moving hands and feet mechanically thankfully trusting that Andy was finding the best route which is a huge comfort on a climb like this.

Finally at 4:30pm we reached the other side of K2 (the safe side) at which point I was overcome by massive joy. I was then willing to declare that we'd done it. Capital Peak was mine and I was now sure I would get the remaining 5 peaks yet this summer, completing my goal of climbing all 58 Rocky Mountain fourteeners.

Out came the second bottle of champagne and the biggest grin on my face. I shot a satellite message then that said *"down from the hard stuff – safe now"* and finally I started to eat some food.





We hiked the boulders down to the snowfields where we were able to glissade major parts of the basin. Our asses got cold and wet, snow jammed between my back and my pack but I didn't care. The weather was glorious, we had bagged our peak and now we were kids having fun.



Finally I got to use my ice axe for arresting the speed of the descent, although it was barely needed in these perfectly-pitched slopes.



Glissading Capitol – now that adds to the story, yes?



After the basin, we had to snow-climb back up to the Daly/Capitol saddle which we achieved at 8:30pm just exactly as the sun was setting in the west. Andy pulled his pack off so we could eat some more.

And then we ground down the final 900' to camp



Here I'm nearing camp at about 9:15pm, totally exhausted and happy despite 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ hours of climbing.

Even then I hadn't fully processed the day. It wasn't the first time I'd surprised myself with how far the mind can push the body.

I'd recently seen a quote that says it best:

"To Be a Winner you have to have the skill and the will. But, the will must be stronger than the skill."

Mohammad Ali



I can now look out our windows towards Capitol and remember every foot of what it's like to get to that summit – a climb I'll never forget. **Andy Mishmash knows what a gift he has given to me – there is no way I could have done this climb without his guidance, patience, skill and friendship. In the end that is the true joy of an adventure like this. Thank you Andy! I totally get your love of these mountains.**